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WHO MISJUDGED IN VIETNAM?

For months in advance of the savagely successful Communist offensive in South Vietnam, American military and diplomatic and intelligence sources had been predicted that an enemy blow would fall. For months these sources noted a buildup of men and supplies in this staging area and that — of North Vietnam, of Laos, of Cambodia, and even in the demilitarized zone. Our planes were assigned the task of interdiction, and they bombed away, ton after ton after ton of high explosives.

How, then, did the enemy gain the advantage that lies with major tactical surprises on the battlefield? How did he advance for virtually the first five days unimpeded and seize the entire province of Quang Tri, including the provisional capital of the same name?

No one is saying at this juncture, of course. Too many faces are too red at this point — and in Washington no less than at the American military headquarters in Saigon.

The question that no official is discussing openly is this: Were we caught with our intelligence down? Generally speaking, there are two schools of thought on this score.

The first is to the effect that, on the contrary, intelligence reported all too accurately what the enemy was doing — where he was massing, with what armament, et cetera. This data, in turn, was relayed to the higher commands, and from the higher commands to the area of the policy-makers in Washington. What the policy-makers made of this intelligence — or what they failed to do with it — was not the responsibility of the intelligence establishment.

This theory, if it in fact fits the reality, validates the general philosophy of intelligence-gathering as explained to the members of the American Society of Newspapers Editors in April 1971 in Washington by Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms. It is not the task of the intelligence community to make policy and, indeed, it eschews this role altogether, Mr. Helms stressed. The CIA, and its military and other counterparts throughout the Federal Government, must operate like a well-drilled newspaper city room. It uncovers facts, it reports them — but as a reporter does not make policy for a newspaper, neither does an intelligence agent do so for the Government of the United States.

The second school of thought about our Vietnam intelligence is a contra view. It argues that our intelligence failed utterly, because while it may have known of the enemy concentrations, it misjudged the direction which the Communist thrusts finally took. That may have been because the North Vietnamese divisions, committed to fighting set-piece battles with tanks and infantry and co-ordinated artillery for the first time since the American intervention, dropped all pretense at "infiltration" and struck boldly down main transportation arteries. In this case it was coastal Highway 1.

Nor, says the second school of thought, did intelligence estimate correctly the vast stores of huge and complex weapons and their firing systems which the enemy succeeded in emplacing and deploying. The fact that the North Vietnamese were able to lob 2,000 artillery shells into the

Loc in a single day quite obviously astonished not only military intelligence but the Abrams headquarters in Vietnam. And all this despite the presence in the American technological arsenal of such devices as acoustical "sensors," sky-spy aerial techniques, infrared photography and who knows what other super-snooper devices and systems. So sophisticated have the North Vietnamese become in warfare that they actually employed counter-measures which the Americans, to say nothing of the South Vietnamese, did not know they possessed.

As a consequence, whether American intelligence was at fault, or whether Dr. Henry A. Kissinger's National Security Council Intelligence Committee failed to anticipate the enemy's movements and his strength despite good intelligence, the result on the battlefields of South Vietnam has been the same: Once again, we have grossly underestimated our foe.

For that error, we are paying price. It is high indeed.